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SUBJECT: FOLLOW-UP TO THE CAIRO SPEECH: OPPORTUNITIES FOR
MUSLIM ENGAGEMENT IN BAHRAIN

REF: (A) STATE 71325 (B) MANAMA 353 (C) MANAMA 435

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The President's June 4 speech in Cairo elicited a favorable reaction from most Bahrainis, who are anticipating increased engagement based on the initiatives outlined in the President's remarks. In response to ref A, Post recommends that existing programs - such as academic and professional exchanges that facilitate people-to-people interaction - be expanded. Post also suggests that increased resources be devoted to encouraging American students and scholars to come to Bahrain for research and academic study. To further economic engagement, Post believes that Bahrain could benefit from entrepreneurship and technical assistance training programs, and activities to support business linkages between small and medium enterprises. Lastly, science and technology is an under-exploited field in Bahrain, and contacts are eager to undertake steps to establish a scientific center of excellence. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Bahraini leadership continues to express optimism (ref B) about the President's speech, as well as general willingness to take concrete steps to help implement his ideas on educational, economic, and scientific partnerships (ref C).

¶3. (U) Embassy Manama already manages a broad range of activities that address the objectives highlighted in President Obama's June 4 speech and help achieve the goals of the Mission's Strategic Plan, including enhancing regional security, countering terrorism and violent extremism, expanding trade and economic growth, strengthening democratic institutions and citizen empowerment, and supporting Middle East peace. Recent examples include:

-- U.S. speaker program on entrepreneurship and small business, especially for women, as well as a visit by a Fulbright Specialist analyzing the economic benefits to Bahrain from the U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement;

-- Representational events supporting the new Bahraini-American Cultural Exchange Society, and the recipients of the Crown Prince International Scholarships, which highlighted the importance of people-to-people cultural and academic exchanges;

-- An incoming Fulbright scholar assigned to the Bahrain Teachers College to assist in national educational reform efforts;

-- U.S. speaker program in Bahrain for an American Imam and other Ramadan-related activities to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue;

-- Amplification of the President's message during Post interactions with GOB officials, members of the business community, civil society activists, journalists, academics and faculty, and students; and

-- The July, 2009 joint State/CENTCOM regional ambassadors' conference focusing on Middle East peace, regional security, and counterterrorism efforts.

¶4. (SBU) These and other outreach activities have been well-received. One Embassy contact recently praised the Mission's efforts to implement the President's goals saying that the American Embassy is trying to make a difference and engage with Bahraini society. Nevertheless, the most often repeated request is for the Embassy to expand its efforts and "do more," specifically with regard to exchange opportunities; English language learning; and training in business, leadership development, and entrepreneurship.

¶5. (SBU) Post believes that many of the President's objectives for engagement with Muslim communities can be achieved in Bahrain through expansion of already existing exchange programs and scholarships. Academic exchanges such as the NESI Undergraduate Fulbright Program, the Fulbright Graduate Program, the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program, and the MEPI Student Leaders Program are highly competitive and make substantial inroads in creating a positive image of America and countering extremist views, especially among traditionally under-served populations in the country. These exchanges have successfully provided a vehicle for Post to engage with disenfranchised Shi'a youth and counter negative perceptions of the United States. However, many of these positive gains can be lost when the bureaucracy does not

adequately support people-to-people exchanges. A recent example is the cancellation of year-long scholarships of YES participants only days before their scheduled departure, a decision which resulted in negative local press coverage and which tarnished the reputation of the program in Bahrain.

¶6. (SBU) Bahrainis would welcome more American students and scholars to their academic institutions, recognizing the role the Fulbright candidates play in transferring knowledge, creating professional linkages, and strengthening the capacity of Bahraini society. The Ambassador recently met with the President of the University of Bahrain (UoB), Dr. Ebrahim Janahi, and discussed President Obama's initiatives. During the meeting, Dr. Janahi asked that the State Department fund additional Fulbright candidates or opportunities for American university students to study in Bahrain. Post has already established a linkage between American University and UoB students by facilitating a joint class via digital video conference in spring 2009. Additionally, Post has been in dialogue with NEA/PPD and American partner organizations about the inclusion of Bahrain in the National Security Language Initiative -Youth program, which would bring American high school students to Manama. Local partners, including the Bahraini-American Cultural Exchange Society and others, have queried Post on how they can assist in exchange efforts by providing home stays and other support.

¶7. (SBU) Exchanges aside, Bahraini academics, journalists, and civil society activists are interested in promoting global understanding and interfaith dialogue. UoB officials told Ambassador that they would like to establish a venue that encourages national and international dialogue on social empowerment, religion, and other issues. Ten years ago, the University of Bahrain established an American Studies Center, which could be graduated into a Center for U.S.-Muslim Engagement. Sufficient staffing, including appointment of a dynamic director to provide management and partnering with relevant local organizations would help boost the center's capabilities.

¶8. (SBU) One challenge to program implementation is a lack of English language proficiency, especially among disenfranchised youth. There is a considerable need to

develop English language skills of young Bahrainis. Post has successfully implemented English language training for Ministry of Education teachers and has funded English language studies for approximately 400 traditionally under-served Bahraini youth through the Access Microscholarship Program. The latter was linked to an internship program developed in partnership with the American Culture and Education Center and offered participants an opportunity to use their English in a work setting and gain professional experience. Similar internship opportunities for youth and young professionals in the United States would be beneficial.

¶9. (SBU) The GOB and business leaders are eager to enhance job creation and economic development in the country. Post encourages the creation of a corps of business volunteers to partner with counterparts in Bahrain, with special focus on experts in small and medium enterprises who can conduct research and provide training and workshops for local Bahraini business owners and entrepreneurs. Specialists who can initiate trade development programs with the Bahraini Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the local chapter of the American Chamber of Commerce would be welcomed. Post could also build on or expand successful MEPI initiatives such as the Women's Corporate Leadership Program, Vital Voices Program, or Women in Technology program that expands the entrepreneurial capacity of Bahraini women. Establishing a partnership with a U.S. business school to develop short-term exchanges on entrepreneurship for Bahraini business leaders would also enhance economic development.

¶10. (SBU) In our view science and technology are fields that remain under-exploited in Bahrain and that could be strengthened to offer numerous possibilities for exchanges, partnerships, internships, and professional opportunities. The Bahrainis are eager to establish a regional center of scientific excellence (ref C) and are seeking guidance on how to submit a proposal.

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